

Florian Ebner

The Archaeologist Among Urban Landscape Photographers

(....) Arwed Messmer's carefully composed visual construct made from his own and archive photographs amounts to a taking stock of an area that was once the historic centre of Berlin. To achieve this, he combines images from the immediate post-war period and the subsequent phase of reconstruction in what had just become the capital of East Germany with images from the last fifteen years that document the disappearance of communist-era buildings declared undesirable by the city's new rulers. It is precisely the juxtaposition and cross-fading of these two periods of time that produce a sharply delineated picture: the ongoing destruction of the past, whether it be as a consequence of war or of an ideological rejection of what has gone before, leads to the facelessness of the present, to the anonymous heart of the German metropolis.

(...) On the other hand, though, Arwed Messmer has continued developing his own artistic approach for depicting the present out of an understanding of the historical past. This approach proceeds dialectically. The choice of landmarks and coordinates, around which his investigations revolve, is now determined to a decisive degree by images of the past. At the same time, the underlying visual mode of this working method adopted by Messmer remains the photographic perception of the present, which he records in the style of the critical topographic urban and landscape photography of the 1980s and 1990s – the tradition out of which his work has evolved. To a certain extent, Messmer's images stake out the terrain upon which the historical photographs serve as flashbacks to selected moments in time directing our attention to the latent history of these places. In this book, the many huge piles of soil behind which the city looks as though it might be about to vanish evoke the documentary tradition of someone like Lewis Baltz, yet at the same time, such subjects fit neatly with the archaeological aspect of his work involving the "excavation" of historical images. Messmer's combinational mode of dealing with this visual material, however, does not employ the sometimes rather mechanical method enthusiastically pursued by various other photographers and institutions, in which every old photograph is invariably accompanied by an up-to-date view of the same place. Messmer's freedom to turn to historical images only when it seems appropriate allows him more room to introduce and play with subtle shadings and nuances. Thus, in addition to Tiedemann's expansive, vacant prospects of the new East Berlin that correspond so well with the temporary emptiness of today, he also makes use of the same photographer's images of Old Berlin – not without reason do these remind the viewer of Eugène Atget's photographs of Paris – in order to demonstrate even more clearly that the destruction of the past has led to the anonymity of the present.

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